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Creating Empathetic Academic Service Excellence: The Case of a University in Florida

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Abstract

This qualitative instrumental case study explored the role of faculty in creating empathetic academic service excellence at a public university in Florida. Based on interviews with diverse faculty, the study investigated how empathy was enacted in faculty-student interactions and the practical strategies to foster inclusive, supportive learning environments. The findings revealed that faculty empathy was expressed through personalized responsiveness, flexible support strategies, and meaningful engagement with students inside and outside the classroom. Faculty who shared personal experiences and demonstrated understanding of students' diverse challenges helped build trust, motivated persistence, and promoted student well-being. The study also highlighted barriers to empathetic practice, including time constraints, insufficient training, and institutional cultures that may not have prioritized emotional engagement. Theoretical grounding in Emotional Intelligence (EI) underscored the importance of empathy as a core competency for academic service excellence. While the research was limited by its single-institution focus and reliance on faculty self-reporting, it offered practical implications for faculty development and institutional policy. The study concluded by recommending broader, multi-institutional research and the inclusion of student perspectives to further understand and enhance empathetic academic service in higher education.

Keywords: empathy, academic service excellence, faculty, higher education, emotional intelligence, student engagement.

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Introduction

Pursuing academic service excellence is a cornerstone for universities striving to thrive in today's competitive higher education landscape (Wirtz & Zeithaml, 2018). In higher education, service quality is shaped by the dynamic interactions between faculty and students, with excellence emerging when student expectations are met and exceeded (Grönroos, 1984; Parasuraman et al., 1985, 1988). This is particularly relevant for universities in Florida, where diverse student populations and evolving educational demands require institutions to continuously adapt their service delivery models (Govender et al., 2014; Sutin, 2018).

Empathy has become an essential component of academic service excellence, enabling faculty to recognize and respond to the unique needs of both traditional and nontraditional students (Khattab, 2019). Faculty who engage empathetically are better positioned to tailor academic services, advance inclusive learning environments, and provide the mentorship and support necessary for student persistence and success (Thapa et al., 2013; Tinto, 1998). Research indicates that insufficient faculty engagement and support significantly contribute to student attrition, emphasizing the imperative for faculty to play an active, empathetic role in students' academic journeys (Moss & Slate, 2017; Simmons, 2017).

However, delivering high-quality, individualized academic services is complex due to the intangible and heterogeneous nature of educational services, making it challenging to identify and address service gaps before they affect student outcomes (Parasuraman et al., 1985; Souca, 2011). Faculty often struggle to discern students' distinct requirements, as general academic services do not always meet the diverse needs of all learners (Lederer et al., 2021). This challenge is compounded by the increasing sophistication of student expectations and the rapid integration of technology in instructional activities (Khan & Matlay, 2009; Ortiz, 2020).

Given these complexities, there is a pressing need to explore how faculty can create empathetic academic service excellence, particularly within the unique context of Florida's higher education institutions. Faculty are expected to meet a wide range of student needs, respond to shifting institutional expectations, and adapt to new technologies and teaching environments (Kim et al., 2021; Sutin, 2018). These demands became even more visible during the COVID-19 pandemic and aftermath, when faculty had to quickly adjust their teaching methods while still supporting students academically and emotionally. Because of these challenges, it is important to understand how faculty can provide academic services that are both effective and empathetic, recognizing students' circumstances, challenges, and diverse backgrounds.

The diversity of the student body of Florida higher education institutions adds another layer of complexity. The state's colleges and universities serve a highly diverse student population, including first-generation students, multilingual learners, working adults, and students balancing family responsibilities. These students often rely heavily on faculty support to navigate their academic programs. Understanding how faculty in Florida interpret and deliver academic service excellence to this diverse student body is therefore essential because their actions directly influence student persistence and success.

While universities across the country are working hard to improve the quality of academic services by adopting new strategies and frameworks (Tayeb, 2016; Weerasinghe et al., 2017; Yamaqpta, 2014), there is still limited research on what service excellence looks like in day-to-day faculty practice. Most existing studies focus on institutional policies or student satisfaction surveys, but they do not capture the lived experiences of faculty who deliver these services in real time. This gap makes it difficult for institutions to design practical training, support systems, or evaluation tools.

The study was conducted to address this gap. It seeks to understand how faculty define academic service excellence, how they strive to deliver it, and the challenges they face, especially during periods of disruption such as the pandemic. By examining faculty perspectives, the study

provides insight into the specific behaviors, attitudes, and competencies that contribute to meaningful academic service experiences.

Continued research is needed to understand how service excellence is enacted in practice and how faculty create meaningful service experiences that support student persistence. By leveraging contemporary models of service quality and best practices in faculty engagement, universities can develop academic environments that meet and anticipate, and respond to the evolving needs of their students, ultimately supporting institutional sustainability and student success (Al Shobaki & Abu Naser, 2017; Wirtz & Zeithaml, 2018).

Purpose of Study

This qualitative instrumental case study examined the faculty's role in creating empathetic academic service excellence in a selected university in Florida. The research question was: What is the role of faculty in creating empathetic academic service excellence in a selected university in Florida?

Literature Review

Empathy in higher education is increasingly recognized as a fundamental element of academic service excellence. Faculty members play a crucial role as primary agents of student engagement, promoting empathetic environments that enhance student learning and well-being.

Initially rooted in psychology and philosophy, empathy has evolved to encompass educational contexts. Formerly defined as the cognitive and emotional engagement that allows one to identify with another's emotions and offer support that reflects genuine emotional insight, empathy has been incorporated into educational theories that emphasize holistic student development. For example, the humanistic approach to education accentuates the importance of addressing students' emotional and social needs alongside their cognitive growth (Bairaktarova & Direito, 2024).

Faculty members' influence on the academic environment is significant. Research shows that when faculty share aspects of their identity and personal experiences, they foster trust and openness, encouraging deeper student engagement (Hamdan et al., 2024). This identity sharing is vital for building empathetic relationships, supporting students, and retaining them.

Nonetheless, challenges remain in implementing empathy within academic settings. Faculty often encounter barriers such as time constraints, inadequate training, or institutional cultures that do not prioritize emotional engagement. To overcome these challenges, institutions must provide support, professional development, and a commitment to encouraging empathetic practices within the academic community.

Empathy is interwoven with academic service excellence, with faculty playing a pivotal role in its cultivation. Faculty can create empathetic environments conducive to student success through intentional practices, identity-sharing, and service-learning participation. Ongoing research and institutional support are necessary to address the challenges of incorporating empathy into higher education.

Empathy, as a vital component of academic service excellence, is evident in faculty who create environments that support student engagement, learning, and overall well-being (Bridenbaugh et al., 2024). Empirical research has demonstrated a strong association between faculty empathy and positive student outcomes, including improved academic performance, greater satisfaction, and higher retention rates (Bridenbaugh et al., 2024). When faculty exhibit empathy by understanding student challenges, showing patience, and offering flexibility, students report stronger connections with educators and improved morale. Sharing personal experiences and vulnerabilities fosters trust, encouraging students to engage more deeply, especially those facing academic or personal difficulties (Bridenbaugh et al., 2024).

Villena Martínez et al. (2024) assessed empathy among university educators using the Interpersonal Reactivity Index. They found high levels of perspective-taking and empathic concern, with female faculty often reporting higher empathy scores. Greater empathy was correlated with more positive faculty-student relationships and more effective support for student development (Villena Martínez et al., 2024).

Williams (2023) conducted a qualitative study examining how career college students experienced a student success course designed to improve persistence and achievement. Many participants emphasized that guidance on time management, academic planning, and personal growth gave them a sense of direction they had not felt before. The findings suggest that student success courses can promote a sense of belonging and motivation, particularly for nontraditional learners balancing school with work and family responsibilities.

Asmamaw and Semela (2023) shifted the focus from classroom practice to leadership, interviewing faculty about the emotional intelligence of academic leaders in Ethiopian universities. Their qualitative descriptive study found that faculty perceive emotionally intelligent leaders as better at relationship management, empathy, self-management, and self-awareness qualities that, in turn, raise staff engagement and morale (Asmamaw & Samela, 2023). This expands the notion of empathetic service, sets norms for leaders to provide resources that enable empathy to be practiced sustainably.

Veix (2024) examines how students' understanding of emotional intelligence skills shapes their experience during their first year in college. Veix's findings show that students themselves use emotional skills to navigate academic life, such as recognizing anxiety early, negotiating with instructors about deadlines, and seeking peer support when motivation lags. Veix's findings suggest that institutionally supported reflection or coaching could accelerate the development of emotional intelligence (Veix, 2024).

Gold's (2023) study, *Comparison of Emotional Intelligence, Background Variables, and Academic Performance Among Prelicensure Nursing Students*, examined how emotional intelligence relates to nursing students' academic outcomes. The findings showed that higher EI scores, particularly in self-awareness, emotional regulation, and empathy, were associated with stronger academic performance and better clinical evaluations (Gold, 2023). The study emphasized that while traditional measures like GPA are important, emotional intelligence adds a dimension that supports resilience, adaptability, and effective patient care, underscoring its value as a predictor of nursing student success (Gold, 2023).

Moreover, service-learning initiatives provide evidence of the faculty's role in promoting empathy. Bowen (2016) found that when faculty actively facilitate service-learning, students are encouraged to reflect critically on social issues and personal experiences, promoting the development of empathy and civic responsibility. These experiences enable students to connect academic theory with real-world contexts, enhancing their empathy and social consciousness (Bowen, 2016).

In conclusion, while faculty empathy offers numerous benefits, challenges such as time constraints, lack of training, and institutional cultures that may not prioritize emotional engagement often hinder its practice (Bridenbaugh et al., 2024). To embed empathy as a core value within academic service excellence, ongoing professional development and institutional support are essential (Villena Martínez et al., 2024).

Theoretical Framework

Emotional intelligence (EI) is a robust framework for understanding how individuals perceive, manage, and utilize emotions in both interpersonal and professional contexts. This framework is particularly relevant for advancing empathetic academic service excellence. Salovey and Mayer (1990) first introduced EI as the awareness and interpretation of emotional experiences, enabling individuals to respond with intention and emotional clarity in personal and interpersonal contexts. Their foundational work established EI as distinct from cognitive intelligence and highlighted its significance in social and emotional functioning (Salovey & Mayer, 1990).

Subsequent research by Salovey and Mayer (1997) further refined the EI model, identifying four key branches: perceiving emotions, using emotions to facilitate thought, understanding emotions, and managing emotions. This ability-based model distinguishes EI from broader mixed models that combine emotional abilities with personality traits and social competencies (Mayer et al., 2004). Empathy, the capacity to recognize and understand others' emotions, remains a central component of EI and is especially crucial in academic service settings, where faculty and staff must respond sensitively to students' diverse needs and challenges (Mayer et al., 2004; Salovey & Mayer, 1990).

This study highlights the value of EI in educational environments. Romanelli et al. (2006) found that EI contributes to academic performance above and beyond traditional intelligence measures and can be developed through targeted educational interventions. This suggests that institutions can enhance empathetic academic service by nurturing EI competencies among faculty and staff. Furthermore, EI is linked to improved communication, stronger relationships, and greater student and staff satisfaction (Brackett et al., 2011).

Within academic service, empathy is a particularly relevant construct. It enables faculty, advisors, and support staff to anticipate, interpret, and respond appropriately to student needs, thereby improving trust, communication, and satisfaction in academic environments (Boyatzis et al., 2000). When academic service staff demonstrate empathy, students are more likely to feel heard, respected, and supported, which is associated with greater persistence and satisfaction in higher education (Brackett et al., 2011).

Emotional intelligence theory also supports both individual and institutional approaches to service excellence. At the individual level, emotionally intelligent faculty are better equipped to manage classroom dynamics and student relationships. At the institutional level, universities that prioritize EI across their culture, policies, and training foster environments that promote student engagement and well-being (Brackett et al., 2011).

In summary, Emotional Intelligence theory, especially its emphasis on empathy and emotional regulation, offers a comprehensive theoretical foundation for understanding and enhancing empathetic academic service excellence. By integrating EI into individual practice and institutional culture, universities can more effectively address their students' complex emotional and relational needs, ultimately supporting higher levels of satisfaction and achievement (Romanelli et al., 2006).

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative, instrumental case study design to explore the role of faculty in creating academic service excellence in higher education. Qualitative research was selected for its ability to uncover rich, in-depth insights into participants' lived experiences and the meanings behind their actions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015; Yin, 2014). The case study approach enabled a detailed examination of faculty practices and perspectives in their real-world academic environment. It used multiple data sources to ensure a comprehensive and clever understanding of the phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Percy et al., 2015).

Setting

The research was conducted at Emma University (a pseudonym), a four-year public university in Florida. Emma University serves a diverse population, including Florida residents, out-of-state, and international students, with campuses spread across the state (State University System of Florida, 2023). At the time of the study, the university enrolled 13,504 students, 9,280 undergraduates and 4,224 graduates, and employed 659 instructional faculty members. The faculty body was diverse in terms of gender, ethnicity, academic rank, and disciplinary background, reflecting the broader characteristics of higher education faculty in the United States (Kamran et al., 2019). The university offers a range of undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs and is accredited and chartered, providing a representative context for examining academic service excellence.

Participant Selection

As a qualitative study, eight participants were purposefully selected from the faculty population using criterion sampling, which targets information-rich cases that meet specific requirements relevant to the research focus (Patton, 2015). The participants' size aligns with qualitative research guidelines, which emphasize depth of insight over numerical representation and recommend small, information-rich samples for case study inquiry (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015; Stake, 1995). The selected participants met the following study criteria: they were tenured or tenure-track faculty, had taught at Emma University for at least two years, and were actively teaching during the study period. The final list of the participants consisted of six men and two women, a distribution that reflected the gender composition of eligible faculty within the participating departments rather than an attempt to achieve demographic balance. Purposeful sampling in qualitative research prioritizes relevance and experience over proportionality, and the inclusion of both men and women ensured a range of perspectives while remaining true to the context of the case (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Patton, 2015). Participants represented diverse academic backgrounds, including chemistry, education, statistics, and actuarial science, and varied in teaching experience from 2 to 30 years. They also reflected multiple racial and ethnic identities, including White, Asian, and Black or African American. This diversity in discipline, experience, and background strengthened the study by ensuring that each participant could offer meaningful, experience-based insight into how faculty understand and enact academic service excellence (Monteiro, 2017).

Data Sources

Instrumental case study designs benefit from using multiple data sources, such as interviews, observations, archival materials, and existing datasets, to enhance the depth and reliability of findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study collected data from faculty interviews and relevant documents about their role in fostering academic service excellence. The rationale for selecting these sources was to capture first-hand perspectives and contextual evidence, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of faculty practices. Each data source was chosen for its unique strengths and limitations, with careful consideration given to how they would collectively inform the research objectives.

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method. Interviews, defined as dialogues between an interviewer and an interviewee, can be structured, semi-structured, or unstructured (Bird, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). Semi-structured interviews were selected for their flexibility and ability to elicit detailed, in-depth responses, allowing for follow-up questions and clarification (Guest et al., 2013). This approach also enabled the capture of non-verbal cues and encouraged a conversational atmosphere, as recommended by Yin (2014). While interviews offer advantages such as focused data collection and higher response rates (Creswell & Poth, 2018), they also present challenges, including access to participants and the potential influence of the interviewer's demeanor on responses (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). To address these issues, participants were assured of confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms, and rapport was established to create a comfortable, open environment (Yin, 2014). This careful approach helped

ensure the reliability and authenticity of the data collected. Flowing from the research question, the following semi-structured interview questions were posed to interviewees:

1. How do you become aware of your own emotional responses when interacting with students who need additional support?
2. When you encounter a student who is frustrated, anxious, or disengaged, how do you manage your own emotions to remain supportive and effective?
3. Tell me about a time when you had to adjust your communication or behavior to maintain patience, clarity, or calmness during a difficult student interaction.
4. How do you identify the unique needs of your students, especially those who may not openly express their challenges?
5. Can you share an example of when you adapted your teaching or support approach to better meet a student's individual circumstances?
6. What strategies do you use to build trusting relationships with students from diverse backgrounds?
7. How do you create an environment where students feel comfortable approaching you for help or sharing their concerns?
8. What challenges do you face when trying to provide empathetic academic support to students?

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis involved systematically condensing and organizing extensive interview data to identify meaningful patterns and themes related to faculty roles in academic service excellence (Patton, 2015). The process began with content analysis of interview transcripts, in which key elements were summarized, and significant phrases were coded with labels or descriptors that captured the essence of participants' responses (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019). Through constant comparison, similar codes were grouped into categories, enabling the identification of logical groupings and relationships within the data. Both deductive and inductive approaches were employed: deductive analysis focused on patterns aligned with predetermined theoretical constructs, while inductive analysis allowed for the emergence of new insights directly from the data (Patton, 2015; Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019). Finally, categories were synthesized into overarching themes based on similarities, frequency, and context, and redundant or irrelevant data were removed to ensure clarity. This systematic approach enabled the reduction, interpretation, and meaningful presentation of qualitative findings.

Findings

Three themes emerged from the data collected to answer the research question: What is the role of faculty in creating empathetic academic service excellence in a selected university in Florida? Three major themes emerged from the data analysis: responsiveness to students' needs, student support strategies, and student-to-faculty interaction. Participant narratives support the themes, and pseudonyms such as A, B, C, and D are used to ensure participants' anonymity.

Responsiveness to Students' Needs

Participants' responses showed that many faculty members were responsive to students in ways that supported their academic success and progression toward graduation. Faculty G described his approach of responsiveness by sharing the following narrative:

I tell them I have been there before. That is what I always say; I have been there. I have done this before, and I was in this situation before. So, because I have lived that life, I relive my experience as a student with my students so they can do it too. These are challenging times, but you can do this; I empathize with you. I have been there. I have done that before. For me, that is what empathy is all about.

Faculty G believed that when students realize faculty are sensitive to their struggles, it creates a supportive environment conducive to academic service excellence. Similarly, Faculty B emphasized the importance of mutual respect and understanding, drawing from his experiences as a student: “There is mutual respect in the relationship I have with students because I was once a student. So, just because I am a faculty member does not mean I should disregard my students’ emotional needs.” Faculty C, who works primarily with master’s and doctoral students, noted that while many students are self-aware, some may not recognize when they need help. Faculty C explained:

All my students are either master's students or doctoral students. They are knowledgeable, and they know when they need help. However, I have had a couple who do not know they need help but do. However, I offer them something that leads them to a place where they recognize they need help. I am not too overt about it, but I think that is the best help I can give them as master's and doctoral students.

Faculty A supported the idea that empathy and responsiveness to students’ emotions are crucial to their success. Faculty A shared:

What I do most is empathize or try to make sure they know I was once a student. I have also had struggles. I point out that things like math are hard. I struggled a lot with math. However, here are some things you can do to improve. Returning to the previous information will be tough, but that is where you need to spend your time and focus. I empathize more than just saying you need to learn this, and that inspires or breaks down this barrier that is usually there.

Faculty D and Faculty F echoed similar sentiments, stressing the importance of gentle language and affirming students’ experiences. Faculty D explained:

From their perspective, an email always says you are right. Especially in difficult situations, this type of tone will soften the conversation. I make them feel that their ideas are valued and that I am happy about their ideas and accomplishments.

Faculty F added:

I make my students understand that I have been there before. I told them that failure in a course, one examination, or a not-too-good performance is not the end of one's life or defines the student's entire performance.

These narratives collectively illustrate how faculty empathy, expressed through personal sharing, supportive language, and recognition of students’ challenges, fosters an environment where students feel understood, valued, and motivated to succeed.

Student Support Strategies

Participants’ responses revealed that accommodations for students, such as faculty flexibility in addressing students’ needs and providing alternative roles and assignments for those with unique circumstances or who cannot meet deadlines, were pivotal in promoting academic service excellence. The literature supports the argument that faculty readiness to provide additional support mechanisms and allowances is critical for motivating students to excel academically (Ortiz, 2020; Snijders et al., 2020). Several participants noted that Emma University’s faculty employed flexible teaching and

learning methods and encouraged students to ask for assistance without hesitation. Faculty C highlighted this approach, stating:

In January, one of my students had COVID. Another and his wife had COVID. They have all kinds of medical problems, just like people do. Somebody's father-in-law died. I tried to be very empathetic and sympathetic, and I made allowances. I trust them. I know that sometimes, students need to be more trustworthy. Somebody might have said, well, my grandmother is sick, and I went to see her because they do not have the assignment, and that is all right. I trust them. These are people who have a job, and they are working full time. They are going to school, and most of them have families. One or two do not have families, but most have families. I do not see how they do it all, but I make allowances when they ask me. If they do not ask me and they are missing some work, I get to them and say, Are you having problems? Can I help you with something? What is the holdup here? I would never say, Where are you? Get it in by so and so. No, I would never do that. Is there anything I can do to help you get in? That is the relationship I have established with my students.

Faculty A added that he tried to make room for all his students. Faculty A remarked:

Since students are struggling with a particular topic, I either readdress it in class or address it one-on-one, because students who are willing to come to me during office hours may do so. Still, students unwilling to come to me during office hours may also struggle. I will bring that up in class and try to teach it differently. I do make room for students to submit late assignments or makeup tests.

Similarly, Faculty E stated, "Students are expected to have acquired certain skills and competencies, so I provide students with the needed assistance." Faculty G noted that each student is unique, as are their needs, goals, and aspirations; therefore, he provided students with the necessary accommodations and assistance to meet individual needs. Faculty G remarked:

Usually, I have students come to me and say, "I am an A student," even before the course starts, and right away I know this student is a high achiever. Some students may come to class late, either not very seriously or need a slight push. I teach most of my courses in the evenings, and my evening courses are filled with students who are parents, who work full time, and sometimes are unwell. These are all some of the issues that I can pick out. I tried not to blame anybody but to see how to accommodate those students. It is about being more personable so that students can open up and let you know their exact needs. I know how students operate, so I emphasize more in one area and less in another.

Student-to-Faculty Interaction

All participants agreed that social interaction between faculty and students motivates students. Their empathy for students was not limited to academics and classroom management alone, but also to what happened to students outside of the classroom setting. Participants revealed that Emma University is keen on promoting community among students, where faculty take a holistic approach to providing excellent academic service. Participants also believed that being part of students' social life gave students a sense of community, trust, and confidence, and the willingness of individuals to share their personal experiences with faculty members, particularly experiences that have had a significant impact on their academic success. Faculty G remarked:

Apart from going to the library and meeting them, talking with them, and so on, I try to have extracurricular activities on campus with my students. For example, there are other situations where a student may invite me to an extracurricular activity and say, We are doing a fundraiser for this or that. I show up to let them know that I value what they do even outside of class, and I want to see them, you know, progressing, and so that is just an example.

Similarly, Faculty H intimated that there is easy communication when trust is built over time. Faculty H explained:

I position myself in such a way that they can trust me and that I understand their needs, and I will do everything to support them. Trust is built initially, and I show them I genuinely care about them. For example, I have a student who was at the proposal stage of her dissertation but had delayed her work because she gave birth to two kids. So, I called her last month and told her she needed to pick up from where she left off; otherwise, I would not supervise her work again. We discussed her challenges, and I guided her on how to continue with her work. My call prompted her to take her work seriously. Yesterday, she got her IRB approval letter and will start collecting data. She would have given up on herself if I had not contacted her.

Faculty H further suggested that though the evidence of empathetic academic service excellence may be subtle, empathizing with students on their issues outside the classroom directly relates to students' academic success. Other participants mentioned they felt obligated to attend to students' social issues or problems to show their commitment to understanding students' issues emotionally and providing relevant support. Faculty E remarked, "I do invite my students to Thanksgiving and other holidays so that they can feel at home." Faculty A recounted a situation where he had to attend a student's athletic game. Faculty A recounted:

A student approached me with a concern after class one afternoon. The student's issue was that he had a tournament, and all his teammates' families would be there. They would take pictures as a team and with their families after the game, but his parents could not attend the tournament because of health issues, so he wanted me to be there and represent his family. I accepted his request and attended the tournament as promised. This made a whole difference for the students, and I am glad I attended the tournament. I still have the pictures we took that day.

Discussion

The findings from this study reinforce and expand upon the growing body of literature that positions empathy as a bedrock of academic service excellence in higher education. Three major themes, responsiveness to students' needs, student support strategies, and student-to-faculty interaction, emerged from the data and collectively illustrate the multifaceted ways faculty contribute to an empathetic academic environment.

The first theme, responsiveness to students' needs, was vividly demonstrated through faculty narratives that described an understanding of students' academic challenges and a willingness to share personal experiences and vulnerabilities. Faculty members frequently referenced their student journeys, using personal stories to build trust and rapport. This approach aligns closely with the literature, particularly the work of Hamdan et al. (2024) and Bridenbaugh et al. (2024), who found that faculty identity sharing promotes openness and deeper student engagement. The findings corroborate these studies, showing that students feel more understood and motivated when faculty openly acknowledge their past struggles and empathize with current student difficulties. As described by several participants, the emphasis on gentle language and affirming students' experiences echoes the humanistic educational philosophy outlined by Bairaktarova and Direito (2024), which advocates for addressing students' emotional and social needs alongside their academic development.

The second theme, student support strategies, further substantiates the empirical literature that underscores the importance of flexibility and individualized support in academic settings (Ortiz, 2020; Snijders et al., 2020). Faculty in this study described a range of accommodations, from allowing late submissions to proactively reaching out to students facing difficulties. These accounts support the assertion that faculty empathy is not merely attitudinal but is enacted through concrete, supportive behaviors. Notably, the findings highlight a better understanding of student diversity in academic ability and life circumstances, prompting faculty to tailor their support accordingly. This adds depth to

the literature by illustrating how empathy is operationalized in daily academic practice, particularly in response to unforeseen challenges such as illness or family emergencies.

The third theme, student-to-faculty interaction, underscores the critical role of social engagement beyond formal classroom settings. Participants shared experiences attending extracurricular events and celebrating personal milestones, reflecting a comprehensive commitment to students' holistic development. This finding aligns with prior research emphasizing the importance of faculty-student relationships in promoting student success. For instance, Lillis (2011) highlights that faculty emotional intelligence positively influences student-faculty interactions, which can enhance student retention. Additionally, Bozkurt and Ozden (2010) found that empathetic classroom climates significantly impact students' academic success. The present study adds to this literature by illustrating how faculty involvement in students' lives, including participation in athletic events and community gatherings, creates a more profound sense of connection and community. Though often subtle, such gestures were perceived by students as meaningful affirmations of their worth and potential.

This study's novel contribution is the detailed portrayal of faculty identity sharing as a deliberate strategy for building empathetic relationships. While previous research has acknowledged the importance of faculty empathy, the current findings offer a richer, more granular account of how sharing personal experiences and demonstrating vulnerability can break down barriers and inspire students. Additionally, the study sheds light on the understated but impactful ways faculty address students' social and emotional challenges, reaffirming the interconnectedness of academic and personal well-being.

In summary, the findings corroborate the established literature on the benefits of faculty empathy in higher education, while also offering new perspectives on the mechanisms through which empathy is enacted. By illuminating the significant practices of responsiveness, flexibility, and social engagement, this study adds to understanding how empathetic academic service excellence is cultivated in real-world university settings.

Practical Implications

The findings from this study highlight clear, actionable steps faculty can take to foster empathetic academic service excellence. By examining the themes of responsiveness to students' needs, student support strategies, and student-to-faculty interaction, several practical implications emerge for faculty roles and behaviors in higher education.

Faculty who share their academic journeys and challenges help humanize the learning experience. When faculty openly communicate that they, too, have faced obstacles, students feel understood and less isolated in their struggles. This practice encourages students to seek help and fosters a culture of openness and trust. Faculty should be encouraged to integrate personal narratives and empathetic language into their teaching and advising, as this approach breaks down barriers and motivates students to persist.

The study demonstrates that flexibility, such as allowing late submissions, offering alternative assignments, and proactively reaching out to students facing difficulties, is essential for supporting diverse student populations. Faculty who trust their students and accommodate their unique circumstances create an environment where students feel valued and supported. Institutions should support faculty in adopting flexible policies and provide resources or guidelines for making reasonable accommodations, especially for students balancing work, family, and health challenges.

Empathetic academic service excellence extends beyond academic content. Faculty engagement in students' extracurricular activities and personal milestones, such as attending athletic events or inviting students to holiday gatherings, strengthens the sense of community and belonging. Though sometimes subtle, these gestures profoundly impact student motivation and academic

persistence. Faculty should be encouraged and recognized for investing time in building relationships with students outside the classroom, as these interactions contribute significantly to student success.

The findings reinforce the importance of faculty awareness of students' social and emotional challenges. Faculty who check in with students about their well-being, offer a listening ear, and provide guidance or referrals to support services can make a critical difference in students' academic journeys. Institutions should provide training and resources to help faculty recognize signs of distress and respond appropriately, ensuring students receive the holistic support they need.

Finally, the collective actions of empathetic faculty contribute to a broader institutional culture of care and excellence. When faculty consistently demonstrate empathy, it signals to students that their well-being is a priority. This, in turn, can improve student retention, satisfaction, and overall academic achievement. Institutions should celebrate and promote empathetic practices among faculty, integrating empathy into professional development, evaluation, and recognition programs.

In summary, the practical implications of these findings suggest that faculty play a pivotal role in shaping empathetic academic environments. Faculty can create a culture of academic service excellence that supports student engagement, persistence, and success by being responsive, flexible, relational, and attentive to students' holistic needs.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

While this study offers insights into the role of faculty in creating empathetic academic service excellence, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the research was conducted within a single university in Florida, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other institutional contexts or geographic regions. The selected university's unique culture, policies, and student demographics could have influenced faculty practices and student experiences, making it difficult to assume that similar patterns would emerge elsewhere.

Second, the study relied primarily on qualitative data collected through faculty narratives and self-reported experiences. While these rich, descriptive accounts provide depth and details, they are also subject to potential biases such as social desirability or selective memory. Faculty may have portrayed their actions more favorably or emphasized particular stories that align with the study's focus on empathy. Additionally, the absence of direct student perspectives means that the impact of faculty empathy on students' experiences and outcomes was inferred rather than directly measured.

A further limitation is the relatively small and possibly homogeneous sample of participants. The faculty interviewed may share similar values or approaches to teaching and service, particularly if they were selected or self-selected based on an interest in student support and empathetic practice. This could result in an overrepresentation of positive or proactive strategies, while underrepresenting faculty who may struggle with or deprioritize empathetic engagement.

Given these limitations, several suggestions for future research emerge. Expanding the study to include multiple institutions, both public and private, large and small, and diverse geographic areas, would provide a broader understanding of how institutional context shapes faculty empathy and academic service excellence. Including students' perspectives would also be valuable, offering a more comprehensive view of the effectiveness and authenticity of faculty empathy as experienced by those it is intended to benefit.

Future research could also employ mixed-methods approaches, combining qualitative interviews with quantitative measures of student outcomes, such as retention, satisfaction, or academic performance. This would help establish clearer links between faculty empathy and tangible student success indicators. Additionally, exploring the experiences of faculty who face challenges in practicing empathy, due to workload, institutional constraints, or personal factors, could shed light on barriers and support needs that are not fully captured in the current study.

Finally, longitudinal studies could examine how faculty empathy and student support strategies evolve, and how sustained empathetic engagement influences long-term student development and institutional culture.

In summary, while this study provides important insights, its findings are bounded by contextual, methodological, and sample-related limitations. Addressing these through broader, more diverse, and methodologically varied research will deepen our understanding of empathetic academic service excellence in higher education.

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Emily N. Kwaa: *Conceptualization, Investigation, Formal Analysis, Writing – Review & Editing, Project Administration.*

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Transforming the Invisible: A Reggio Emilia-Inspired Art Education Model for Disadvantaged Preschoolers

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Abstract

This action research study investigates the transformative potential of a Reggio Emilia-inspired art education model for disadvantaged preschool children in the Marmara Region of Türkiye. Conducted with a cohort of 22 children aged 4–6—including refugees, children with special educational needs (SEN), and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds—the study sought to dismantle rigid, traditional educational practices that hinder developmental autonomy. Over an 11-week intervention titled “Knowing Artists”, participants engaged with the works of Vincent van Gogh, Frida Kahlo, and Osman Hamdi Bey through inquiry-based studios. Drawing on Wright’s (2020) application of ‘dreamkeeping’ and Cutcher and Boyd’s (2016) framework of collaborative pedagogy, the study illustrates how replacing deficit-based instruction with the “hundred languages” of expression enhanced participants’ visual literacy, communication skills, and social-emotional regulation. The findings suggest that culturally responsive, intentional art education acts as a counter-narrative to the ‘symbolic violence’ often experienced by marginalized children in formal schooling.

Keywords: Reggio Emilia approach, action research, early childhood education, symbolic violence, art education

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Introduction

The intersection of art education and social equity remains a critical frontier in educational research. For children navigating the “cumulative risk factors” of poverty, displacement, or developmental delay, the classroom often represents either a sanctuary of possibility or a site of further marginalization. In the Turkish context, while significant strides have been made in increasing access to early childhood education (ECE), persistent challenges remain regarding the *quality* of pedagogy for vulnerable populations (Oktay, 2005). Traditional, teacher-directed models often prioritize rote learning and conformity, creating what can be described as an “invisible wall” that restricts the child's agency and creative potential.

This paper presents findings from an action research study that implemented a specialized art education model based on the *Reggio Emilia approach*. Originating in post-war Italy, Reggio Emilia offers a radical alternative by conceptualizing the child not as “needy” but as “rich, strong, and powerful,” possessing “a hundred languages” of expression (Malaguzzi, 1993). This study adapts these principles to a state-affiliated preschool in the Marmara Region, targeting a diverse group of disadvantaged students. By engaging with the concepts of “symbolic violence” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Wright, 2020) and “collaborative pedagogy” (Cutcher & Boyd, 2016), the research asks: *How can a culturally responsive, inquiry-based art curriculum transform the learning processes, self-expression, and visual literacy of children whom the system often leaves behind?*

Theoretical Framework

The Reggio Emilia Ethos and Intentional Teaching

Central to this study is the Reggio concept of the *atelier* (art studio) as a laboratory for cognition. Unlike traditional art instruction, which often focuses on the production of identical crafts, the Reggio approach views art as a vehicle for inquiry. Vecchi (2010), a foundational figure in the movement, argues that “aesthetic vibration” activates learning connections that purely logical approaches cannot.

However, a “laissez-faire” approach is insufficient for children who lack prior exposure to art materials. As Richards and Terreni (2022) argue, effective art education in the early years requires a balance; teachers must be “neither hands-off nor very structured” but rather engage in intentional teaching. This involves actively scaffolding learning, introducing artistic vocabulary (e.g., texture, line, mood), and creating a “rich art environment” that invites agency while applying necessary constraints to focus inquiry (Cutcher & Boyd, 2016). This aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, where learning is mediated through social interaction and cultural tools.

Art Education as a Counter to Symbolic Violence

For disadvantaged children—particularly refugees and those with limited proficiency in the dominant language—schools can be sites of “symbolic violence,” where the cultural capital of the home is undervalued, leading children to feel “out of place” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Wright, 2020). Art education serves as a critical equalizer in this context. It provides a non-verbal mode of communication that bypasses linguistic barriers, allowing children to demonstrate competence. Wright (2020), drawing on Ladson-Billings (1994), suggests that artist-educators can act as “dreamkeepers,” offering the emotional and intellectual support necessary to heal educational injuries and restart learning journeys.

Methodology

Research Design

The study employed a Technical/ Collaborative Action Research design. This methodology is inherently practitioner-centered, allowing the researcher (acting as an *atelierista* or specialist art

educator) to identify specific pedagogical problems—such as student disengagement and behavioral dysregulation—and iteratively test solutions (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2021). The approach aligns with Barone and Eisner’s (1997) advocacy for arts-based educational research that seeks to enhance perspectives rather than just measure outcomes.

Setting and Participants

The research was conducted at an Early Childhood Education Center in the Marmara Region of Türkiye during the 2022-2023 academic year. The participant cohort consisted of **22 children** (12 girls, 10 boys) aged 4 to 6 years. The group was characterized by significant heterogeneity and disadvantage. The cohort included children from Syria, Afghanistan, and the Congo (e.g., Nie, Fazal, Ramez, Adisa), many of whom had limited Turkish proficiency and histories of trauma (Dönmez, 2021). As McArdle and Spina (2017) argue, creative arts provide vulnerable children with a non-verbal medium to express complex inner narratives. Participants also included children with autism (Uraz) and developmental delays (Ahmet). In addition, several Turkish students faced severe economic hardship.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through participant observation, pedagogical documentation (photographs, videos, transcripts), and semi-structured interviews with the classroom teacher. Data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis to identify shifts in student engagement, skill acquisition, and social interaction.

The Intervention: “Knowing Artists”

The intervention utilized the Project Approach (Cadwell, 2003), engaging children in deep inquiry into the lives and works of three diverse artists. This moved beyond biography to explore themes of emotion, identity, and culture.

Phase 1: Vincent van Gogh – Emotion and Collaborative Practice

The first phase introduced Van Gogh to explore emotional expression.

- **Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS):** Analysis of *The Potato Eaters* prompted discussions on poverty and sadness. By using open-ended questions (“What is going on in this picture?”), the educator intentionally supported visual literacy (Yenawine, 1999), allowing children to connect the art to their own lived experiences of scarcity.
- **Collaborative Mural:** A large-scale *Starry Night* mural was created. Following Cutcher and Boyd’s (2016) findings on collaborative painting, this activity required children to negotiate space and materials. It transformed their practice from solitary mark-making to a “silent dance” of cooperation, where children mixed paints directly on the paper, discovering secondary colors through shared experimentation.



Figure 1. Children collaborating on the large-scale 'Starry Night' mural, mixing acrylics directly on the paper.

Phase 2: Frida Kahlo – Identity, Pain, and Resilience

Frida Kahlo was selected to address themes of physical difference and resilience, topics highly relevant to the inclusion of children with disabilities in the cohort.

- **Dialogue:** Discussions focused on Frida’s physical pain. Children hypothesized about the arrows in *The Wounded Deer*, suggesting narratives of hurt and exclusion that mirrored their own social realities. One student, *Yahya Abdul* (pseudonym), remarked, “Maybe she wants to belong somewhere but realizes she belongs nowhere,” displaying a profound level of metaphorical thinking. Inspired by the “Remida” approach to creative reuse, children built a sculpture representing “resilience” using recycled materials. This pedagogical choice underscores how alternative, non-structured materials invite children to re-examine their everyday environment and construct shared cultural meanings (Barsotti & Giudici, 2012), while providing a rich, non-verbal medium for cognitive and aesthetic inquiry (Edwards et al., 2011). This complex problem-solving process effectively moved the children from parallel play to a community of practice (Wenger, 1998).
- **Studio Work:** Inspired by the “Remida” approach to creative reuse, children built a sculpture representing “resilience” using recycled materials. This pedagogical choice underscores how alternative, non-structured materials invite children to re-examine their everyday environment and construct shared cultural meanings (Barsotti & Giudici, 2012), while providing a rich, non-verbal medium for cognitive and aesthetic inquiry (Edwards et al., 2011). This complex problem-solving process effectively moved the children from parallel play to a community of practice (Wenger, 1998).





Figure 2. 'Resilience' sculpture constructed from recycled materials during the Frida Kahlo project.

Phase 3: Osman Hamdi Bey – Culture and Heritage

To ground the curriculum in the local context, the final phase focused on the Ottoman intellectual Osman Hamdi Bey. This phase was crucial for validating the cultural heritage of the host country (Alakuş, 2003) and integrating it with the Reggio philosophy.

- **The “Tortoise Trainer” Detective Game:** To analyze *The Tortoise Trainer*, the researcher staged a “crime scene” where the tortoises had “escaped” into the school garden. Children donned detective hats and used magnifying glasses to find clues, integrating science (testing water sources) and math (mapping). This activity exemplifies Dewey’s (1934) notion of “art as experience,” where learning is an active, embodied process that roots aesthetic inquiry into the democratic fabric of everyday life (Riedler, 2024).
- **Ebru (Marbling) Art:** Children engaged in *Ebru*, a traditional Turkish technique. The fluid nature of the water required patience and gentle control, acting as a meditative exercise for high-energy students.

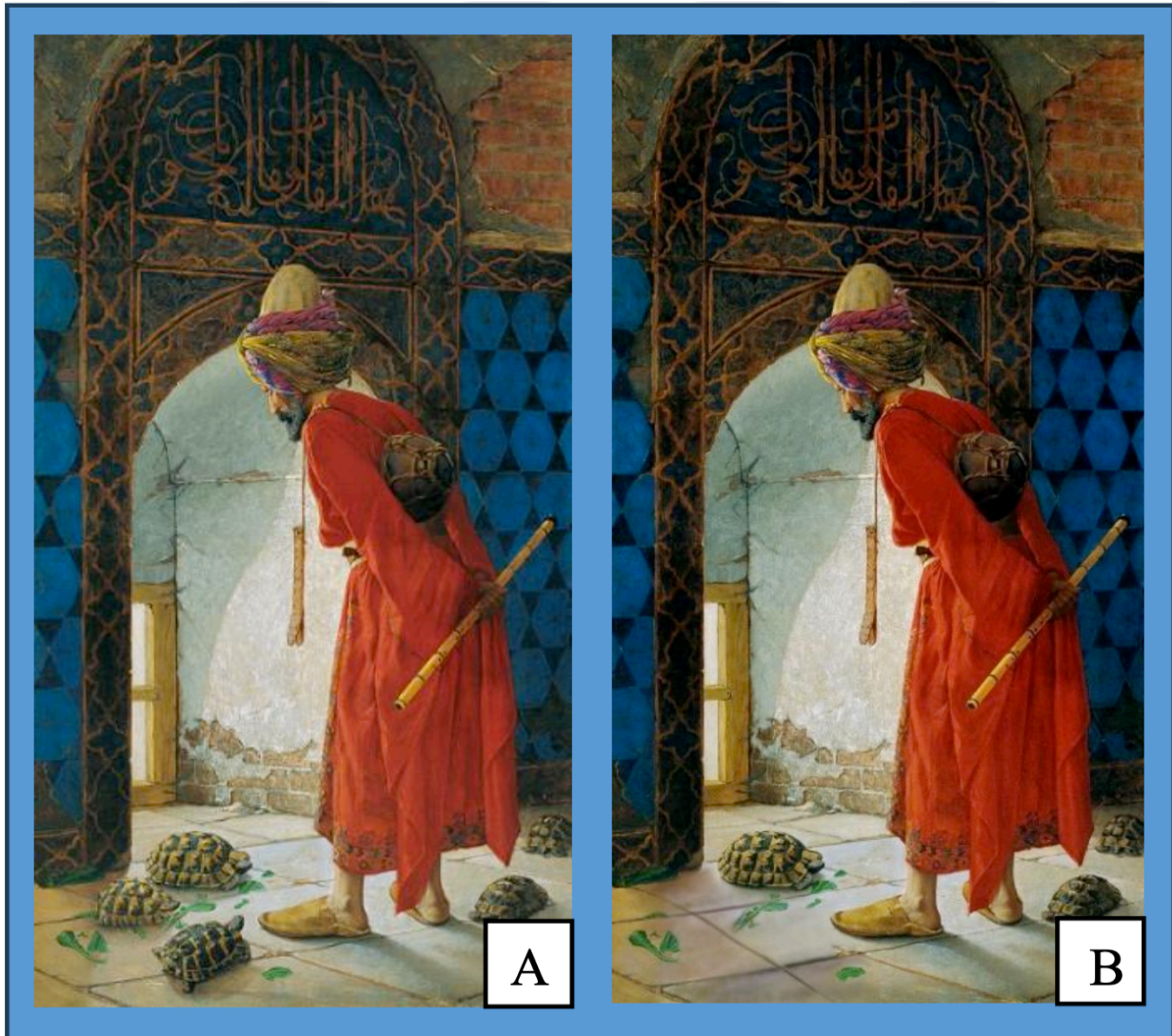


Figure 3. Students acting as detectives to find the ‘escaped’ tortoises from Osman Hamdi Bey’s painting.

Findings

The implementation of the Reggio Emilia-inspired model yielded significant transformations across three key domains.

From Silence to Voice: Transformation of Communication

For non-verbal and refugee children, the art studio became a primary site of communication, countering the “symbolic violence” of a language-dominant classroom (Wright, 2020).

- **Case Study - Ahmet:** A student with developmental delays who had been non-verbal for the entire academic year spoke his first words during a reflection session. Pointing to his projected drawing from the “Happy/Sad Memory” activity, he articulated words like “Mom,” “Dad,” and “Home.” The projection of his work gave him the status required to break his silence.
- **Case Study - Nie:** An Afghan refugee with limited Turkish language skills used her drawings to narrate stories of her homeland, effectively bypassing linguistic barriers to participate in the classroom community.



Figure 4. Nie's drawing depicting a narrative from her homeland, used to bridge the linguistic gap.

Visual Literacy and Critical Thinking

Children transitioned from passive naming of objects to sophisticated interpretation of symbolism. During the *Tortoise Trainer* activity, the children demonstrated deductive reasoning and sustained focus (extending from 5 minutes pre-intervention to over 40 minutes). They began using aesthetic vocabulary (“texture,” “shadow,” “balance”) to critique each other's work, moving away from the “right/wrong” binary of traditional schooling.

Social-Emotional Regulation and Collaboration

The collaborative nature of the projects fostered a shift from parallel play and conflict to cooperative learning. Students initially prone to aggression found positive leadership roles within the studio. The “drama” of the artists' lives (Vincent's sadness, Frida's pain) cultivated a culture of empathy. Children began using the artists' stories as a framework for understanding their peers' emotions, intervening in conflicts with words rather than physical force.



Caption: Figure 5. Collaborative problem-solving during the construction of the 'Remida' sculpture.

Discussion

The Atelier as a Space of Equity

The findings underscore the vital role of the *atelier* in promoting equity. In a traditional classroom, success is often defined by linguistic or logical-mathematical ability—areas where disadvantaged children may have deficits due to environmental factors. The atelier, with its “hundred languages,” democratizes success. A child like Ahmet can demonstrate intelligence and complexity through clay or paint in ways they cannot yet do through speech. This restructuring of the competence hierarchy is essential for building the self-esteem of marginalized students (Vecchi, 2010).

The Teacher as “Dreamkeeper”

The transformation observed in students like Ramez (who moved from disruption to engagement) highlights the role of the educator as a “dreamkeeper” (Wright, 2020; Ladson-Billings, 1994). By providing high-quality materials and “intentional teaching” (Richards & Terreni, 2022)

rather than just supervision, the educator signaled to the children that they were worthy of complex, beautiful experiences. This helped heal the “educational wounds” inflicted by deficit-based models.

Culturally Responsive Reggio Emilia

A critical insight from this research is the importance of cultural adaptation. The inclusion of Osman Hamdi Bey alongside European masters was crucial. It validated the local culture and demonstrated that Reggio principles can be adapted to the specific cultural heritage of the students. The engagement levels during the *Ebru* activities were notably higher, suggesting that children connect deeply when the content reflects their own cultural “funds of knowledge” (Alakuş, 2003; Moll et al., 1992).

Conclusion

This action research provides compelling evidence that a Reggio Emilia-based art education model is a highly effective intervention for disadvantaged preschool students. By shifting the pedagogical focus from “deficit” to “potential,” the model unlocked capabilities in children that traditional methods had suppressed. The transformation of non-verbal and aggressive behaviors into creative expression and collaboration demonstrates that art is not a luxury for the privileged, but a fundamental developmental right.

The study recommends the integration of flexible, project-based art curricula into national preschool programs for disadvantaged areas and emphasizes the need for specialized *atelieristas* who can facilitate deep inquiry. When children are viewed as “rich and powerful,” they rise to meet that image, regardless of their socioeconomic starting points.

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